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SUPERVISION OF CHARITIES IN NEW YORK

Questions relating to the supervision and control of the charitable and reformatory institutions of New York are viewed, as doubtless they are in other States, from the standpoints of two widely differing schools of thought. One school believes that nothing of permanent worth can be accomplished toward the improvement of these institutions without the exercise of direct and positive powers of control by central authorities, while the other is confident that benefits of the most enduring character can be secured through the intelligent exercise of central supervisory powers falling far short of actual control.

A prominent exponent of the former school recently declared to me that it was folly to attempt to secure reforms in the charitable system of the State through moral suasion, meaning thereby supervisory power, and that the only practical method of bringing about desirable changes was through the unrestrained exercise of direct centralized power. He argued that, as a rule, volunteers intrusted with authority to manage charities could not or would not give sufficient time to such work, and further, that they were not infrequently ignorant of the duties imposed upon them and were obliged to leave to subordinates, oftentimes untrustworthy, the management of institutional affairs. Although not agreeing with the views thus expressed, it must be admitted that there is some truth in them as at times applied to particular institutions, perhaps, and that there is much to be said on this side of the question.

The suggestion that the better method of procedure might be to try to enlighten the present volunteer managers or to influence the selection of better ones, was not thought worthy of consideration by the exponent of the centralized plan of control, who considered it not only impracticable, but inexpedient, because a Board composed of a few men could be had who could do all the thinking and the directing that might be necessary. To him it seemed immaterial that this plan contemplated still deeper ignorance and greater inattention than he already attributed to them, on the part of the large body of people voluntarily engaged in the management of charities. That outcome was apparently a matter of no special moment so long as the central

Board could regulate matters at its pleasure. But at the same time it was not explained by what process, especially in these days of political exigencies, when high-salaried offices do not exactly go a-begging, it would be possible to select the limited number of members of the centralized authority, by whatever name known, so that they would be so well fitted for their duties, and so industrious that they could bring a direct personal influence to bear upon every part of a great and complicated system, requiring special knowledge, abundant time, and an eye single to the service.

It is my purpose to show something of what has been and of what can be accomplished through the exercise of the milder supervisory power, which contemplates the continuance of volunteer philanthropic service in all branches of charitable work. The reason for this retention of volunteer service was fittingly expressed by the State Board of Charities to the Legislature of 1901, when the subject was under consideration. The Board then said:

"The management and control of State charitable and reformatory institutions should be intrusted to individual Boards of Managers, composed of philanthropic citizens of the State. Men and women of character and intelligence, who have time and ability to give to the service of the State, should be encouraged, as they are in other States and countries where charitable and reform work has reached a high state of development, to devote themselves to the service of the State, by acting as members of the Boards of Managers of its institutions. This course not only greatly benefits the institutions through the enthusiasm, the special knowledge, and the disinterested and gratuitous service which such members bring to the work, but also keeps the management largely free from the semi-mechanical administration which a central Board of Control, having many institutions and diverse interests to care for, is able to give to each. Besides helping to keep the institutions out of the undesirable routine liable to follow the administration of a central Board of paid officials, it keeps their management in closer touch with the people.

This is not simply a commercial question. These institutions deal with men, women, and children, and are the embodiment of the loftiest philanthropic sentiment of the State. Their work should not be carried on in a mechanical way. Philanthropic service and business ability, combined in the management of these institutions, should produce the best results. Competent Boards of Managers can always be obtained, and their powers can be properly regulated by the legislature."

In this State we have the county almshouse system. This system has been in general existence here since 1824, although there

have been, and still are, a few town almshouses. The town almshouses are at present but two in number, both on Long Island. One of them is used by President Roosevelt's town of Oyster Bay and the adjoining town of North Hempstead, and is partially supported by an endowment fund, or "foundation," as it might be called, and for that reason, doubtless, has been continued. The other is at the near-by town of Hempstead, and is used in part for the poor of the county, which has at present no almshouse of its own.

While those familiar with the subject, either through direct personal knowledge or by reading official reports, readily recognize the ordinary evils incident to the almshouse system, it is commonly agreed, I think, that the county almshouse system is better adapted to improvement, than is the town almshouse system of Massachusetts and other New England States. For one thing, the county almshouse system is more readily inspected; and, for another, it is easier to secure improvements when the cost is distributed over the taxpayers of a whole county than when they must be borne by those of a small town.

Since 1867 the almshouse system of New York has been subject to the inspection of the State Board of Charities, and many improvements have been secured in that system through the visitation of its commissioners and officers; but it is only within recent years that the Board has been given the means to carry on the work in the thorough and systematic manner necessary to secure the best results. Six years ago the legislature gave the Board an appropriation to employ two inspectors to visit and inspect the almshouses, and they were selected through a rigid civil service examination held for that purpose. These inspectors were given careful instructions with relation to their duties and the Board's policy in dealing with the institutions. They were told to inspect the almshouses closely in every department and to state the exact facts, without either moralizing or making use of expressions likely to give offense. Their recommendations for improvements were to be conservative and along specified lines. The Poor Law of the State contains the following provision: "Sec. 118. * * It shall be the duty of such Board (the State Board of Charities) to call the attention, in writing or otherwise, of the Board of Supervisors and the Superintendent of the Poor, or other proper officer, in any county, of any abuses, defects or

evils, which on inspection it may find in the almshouse of such county, or in the administration thereof, and such county officer shall take proper action thereon, with a view to proper remedies, in accordance with the advice of such Board." The almshouse inspectors were accordingly directed to make special mention in their reports of any abuses, defects or evils they discovered in the institutions they examined.

The reports of the inspectors after they had been considered by the officers of the Board and its Committee on Almshouses, and such modifications made as seemed to be necessary, were by order of the Board sent to the respective County Boards of Supervisors and the County Superintendents of the Poor, with the request that they be given consideration and that the abuses, defects or evils, if any were specified, be remedied as soon as possible.

This was, of course, a very simple method of dealing with a great subject, for the almshouses of New York contain a large army, composed of nearly all classes and conditions among the dependent, but it has proved to be a very satisfactory and efficacious one. Not only have many valuable improvements and additions been made to present plants, but in three counties, greatly in need of them, complete new almshouses have been constructed throughout.

These are the counties of Dutchess, Fulton, and Schenectady, and in each case the almshouse has been constructed upon what is known as the "New York Cottage Plan," devised by Hon. William Pryor Letchworth, of Portage, while a Commissioner of the State Board of Charities. The new almshouse of Schenectady County was planned with an eye to the future needs of that rapidly growing locality, at an expense of over \$150,000, and is a model institution. The buildings replaced by these new almshouses were so old and dilapidated as to make their retention of inmates an abuse demanding correction. Largely through the reports of the Board's inspectors, and the co-operation of the county authorities, these very desirable changes were brought about.

At the third session of the State Conference of Charities and Correction, the President of the Conference, Hon. William R. Stewart, then also President of the State Board of Charities, summed up the recent great improvements in the almshouse system of the State by saying:

"Within a brief period, Dutchess, Fulton, Montgomery, and Schenectady Counties, and the City of Oswego, have erected new almshouses of approved and modern construction and equipment. Work has also begun on a new almshouse for Tioga County. Changes, which amount almost to reconstruction, have been made in the almshouse buildings of the following counties: Albany, Broome, Cayuga, Chautauqua, Chemung, Chenango, Erie, Lewis, Nassau, Onondaga, Orange, Schoharie, Steuben, Wayne, and Wyoming.

"Besides many other important improvements, new hospital buildings have been erected, or the older ones greatly improved, in the counties of Essex, Greene, Niagara, Oneida, St. Lawrence, Saratoga, Warren, Washington, and Westchester; also in Poughkeepsie City.

"In addition to these last named, where the feature of the building improvement is the hospital, in almost all of the first two groups of counties named, the hospital is a part of the new equipment. These counties, in connection with the four which compose the city of New York, are those in which the changes and improvements have been so extensive as to be of the first importance.

"In every other county in the State, with the exception of Hamilton and Schuyler, neither of which has an almshouse, improvements of many kinds have been made, all insuring greater comfort for the inmates, better sanitation and protection from fire, and more satisfactory administration. It may be safely stated that there is not a county in the State wherein the condition of the poor who are cared for in almshouses has not been changed for the better during the past five years."

These are relatively but a small part of the beneficent results that have been obtained during the past few years through the judicious and conservative exercise of the supervisory, or "moral suasion" power, as it might fittingly be called. An examination of the Board's records will show similar results obtained through a like system of inspecting and reporting upon the private charitable institutions of the State which are in receipt of public moneys. All these changes and improvements, involving expenditures of hundreds of thousands of dollars, have been secured with a minimum of friction, without any charge of meddling interference, and in but one case, that of an almshouse, the management of which had become thoroughly unsatisfactory, was anything approaching legal action made necessary. The results warrant the belief that this exercise of supervisory authority can and does produce valuable and enduring results in the administration of the charities, at the same time leaving abundant room for the continuance of the valuable philanthropic

service of the volunteer, which helps to rid public relief-giving of its cold and machine-like officialism.

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Secretary State Board of Charities of New York.